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Chinese Lyrics

Chinese Lyrics

FROM THE BOOK OF JADE

Translated from the French of
JUDITH GAUTIER
BY JAMES WHITALL

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Prelude

Prelude

(AFTER JUDITH GAUTIER)

In China, the fame of a poet is not won as in other countries; more gradual in growth there, it is accordingly truer and infinitely more lasting. And for a poet to presume to judge his own verses worthy of being printed, or to arrange a collection of them was an unheard-of occurrence in that ancient empire, and it rarely happens now, except under a foreign influence.

At a gathering of scholars each poet sings his verses in turn; he has the scrupulous attention of his audience, and if one of the poems proves to be exceptional his companions request the privilege of copying it. Those who keep it in their note-books recite it again at other similar gatherings, and allow it to be copied afresh. Thus, in a select circle, the name of the poet diffuses itself like an agreeable perfume.

Sometimes an independent author addresses himself directly to the people. He writes his verses on the wall of a quarter-entrance, most often without signing them. People stop and read them, and those for whom they have a meaning comment upon them, and discuss and explain them to those who are anxious to understand. If a scholar passes and finds the poem worth the trouble, he makes a copy of it which he keeps for his friends, and eventually he puts it with others similarly discovered. Poems kept in this man-

ner are soon wafted from mouth to mouth, become famous and in the end popular. It is then posterity and a sort of plebiscite which determines a poet's claim to distinction.

A century or more often passes before an Emperor issues the command to a committee of scholars to investigate all the poems created during a certain period of years, which have been perpetuated by fame, in order to collect them into volumes. Thus a book is formed like a bouquet of rare flowers, and in its pages the poets fraternize good-naturedly, and their verses complement and contrast with each other in charming diversity.

It is true that if, during their lives, the authors were able to foresee their fame, they never could be sure of it, and only rarely were they present at their triumph. In a few cases, however, poets have been known to receive tributes of appreciation and almost of adoration from their contemporaries, especially when the enthusiasm of an Emperor advanced them to high posts at Court and exhibited them to the world in the limelight of special favour.

So it was in the case of the magnificent *pléiade* of great minds that illumined the reign of Ming-Hoang in the eighth century of our era, and which supplies even today the models and the oracles of poetry, as if they were its patron-saints. Yet even the works of these poets were not published during their lives. And now a few scattered sheets of thin paper or white satin, decorated with delicate designs, are the only

records of those priceless poems that have been preserved with such reverence that not a single one has been lost.

Among the names that posterity has gathered through the ages for the bouquet of immortality, those of Li-Taï-Pé, Thou-Fou, Ouan-Ouey, Tchan-Jo-Su, and Ouan-Tchan-Lin are the most notable. Li-Taï-Pé and Thou-Fou are acclaimed the greatest, without the Chinese daring, however, to decide which surpassed the other. "When two eagles soar into the heavens and are lost to view, which of them," they say, "can be said to have flown nearest to Paradise?"

The poems of Li-Taï-Pé are cast in a brief and original form, difficult rhythms are frequent, and his style is coloured with rare and carefully chosen images, and rich in allusion, implication, and irony. Like Omar Khayyam, he intoxicated himself passionately, extolled wine the only consoler, and threw the veils of inebriation, like gold-spangled shrouds, over the bitterness of this life and the dread of that to come. And behind the screen of intoxication, this poet concealed serious breaches of etiquette, at which the courtiers often took offence, but the Emperor exercised towards him an untiring lenience. Some of the Ministers even reproached him for compromising the Imperial dignity, but to that Ming-Hoang replied, "All that I do in behalf of a poet of such genius can only bring me prominence

in the eyes of superior men. I am not concerned with the opinion of others."

One day, having caused Li-Taï-Pé to be summoned so that he might ask him to celebrate a splendid flowering of peonies, on which he was gazing with Taï-Tsun, his adored favourite, the poet presented himself quite benumbed with intoxication, and the Emperor, with his own hand, stirred the potion that was to disperse the fumes of the *saki,* in order to cool it more quickly.

The Chinese say that Li-Taï-Pé died of the moon, which is peopled, apparently, with the ideal figures the poets have created, and where all the fiction of their dreams is realized. One gorgeous night the poet was supping on the Great River with his friends; the atmosphere was unusually translucent, and the water was so clear that it was practically invisible. The moon shone at the bottom of the abyss as well as in the heavens, and there were as many stars beneath as above. Bending over the gunwale of the junk as if fascinated, Li-Taï-Pé gazed steadfastly into the depths. "In unknown regions," he said suddenly, "there is neither height nor depth. The moon is calling me, and causes me to understand that, to reach the world beyond, it matters little whether one descends or ascends." Forthwith a chorus of harmonious voices was heard, a great whirlwind lashed the tranquil waters, and two young Immortals bearing standards stood before the poet, messengers from the Lord of the Skies, come

to invite him to take his place in the regions above. A dolphin appeared and Li-Taï-Pé laid himself calmly on its back. Then, preceded by the celestial company, he was carried beneath the waters towards the moon, and disappeared forever.

Cynics would ask one to believe that the poet was perhaps simply drowned, but who cares to believe that? A temple has been raised to this subtle and supercilious scholar, where eternal homage will be paid to him who is called in China—noble country where temples are erected to poets—The Supreme Lord of Poetry.

Thou-Fou has admirers who not only declare him to be the equal of Li-Taï-Pé but who even prefer him to that poet. His poems, though less strange and unexpected, are just as picturesque as those of his great friend, whom he recognized as his master. They are more easily translated, being freer from affectation, and they are clearer, fuller of feeling tenderness, of sympathy for a grief-stricken humanity. Less Chinese, perhaps, they are more universal, more within our ken.

Thou-Fou held the office of Imperial Censor, that post which is peculiar to China, so distinguished and yet so hazardous, whose duties consisted of a supervision of the conduct of the Sovereign, and if need be, of regulating it. This was at the Court of Tchane-Gane in that enchanted period which had become a poet's paradise by the grace of that intense ad-

mirer of beautiful poetry, Ming-Hoang-Ti. The high-principled Censor, however, was not the man to flatter his master; one of his reprimands proved too serious for endurance and Thou-Fou fell into disgrace, was exiled from the Court and never consoled himself. The poem bearing the title "Mid-Autumn" is one of those in which he gives vent most poignantly to his grief. In it a curious coincidence is noticeable. At all times and in every nation, poets are found to voice similar sentiments. Ten centuries before Victor Hugo, this Chinese exile reckoned the years by means of Nature's manifestations: "Twice already," he said, "have I seen the chrysanthemums bloom." And during the third October of his exile, Hugo said: *"Pour la troisième fois, je vois les pommes mûres."*

A woman's name is rather rare among those poets whose fame has been established by posterity. There are a few, however, and that of Ly-y-Hane seems to have been considered in the first rank. She lived during the Song Dynasty, in the twelfth century of our era. The Chinese admire Ly-y-Hane, not only as a clever and graceful composer of verses, but as a superior intellect and a true scholar, accustomed to all the minutiæ and intricacies of the art of poetry. In fact, she makes light of them, and accomplishes strange metres and singular innovations with such freedom that one is forced to forgive and admire her audacity.

The incurable wound of her heart, bleeding in solitude, is practically the only subject with which Ly-y-Hane deals, but the isolation, the seclusion and the impotence in the face of action, characteristics of the Chinese woman, are all poignantly expressed in her verses. As far as can be known, the love that devours this Chinese Sappho is ignored by him who inspires it; possibly she has never even seen him, and she makes no effort to show herself or to attract him to her. The fact of her being a woman, customs and the conventions make it impossible. One might say she was a flower become enamoured of a bird; with neither voice nor wings, she can only diffuse her passion-scented soul as she prepares to die.

In her verses Ly-y-Hane always unites her grief with the sphere in which she lives, her encircling universe, or at least as much of it as she can see from her window. The changing seasons are the only events, the objects that adorn her home the only evidences of a life consecrated to the expression of a single sentiment. A detailed biography would throw no more light on her existence than do her poems, in which she reveals simultaneously her remarkable talent and her overpowering mental agony. She lived entombed with her suffering, hoping never to be deprived of it or cured, and she named in advance the volume that posterity would perhaps collect of all her scattered verses: "The Débris of My Heart."

In order to give an adequate idea of Chinese versification, of its complicated rules and infinite refinements, a much longer study would be necessary. To understand and admire a work of art there is happily no need of being acquainted with its technicalities; therefore a few words will be sufficient to indicate the most interesting rules from our point of view. Either the Chinese, as it is often said, have invented and worked it all out, or else the mind of man hits upon the same devices in different countries simultaneously. This much, at least, is true; the principal rules of Chinese versification are identical with ours, and they date back forty centuries: as for instance, the division of lines into an equal number of syllables; the caesura; the rhyme; and the division of verses into four lines. In a quatrain, the two first and the last lines rhyme; the third does not rhyme. The following fragment is given as an example:

IN THE PALACE

Tsi tsi hoa chy—pi y mene.
Hiei jen siang ping—ly khiang hiene
Han tsing yo chouo—khouan tchon sse. . . .
Ying ou tsien teou—pou kan yene.

A charming and original effect, a quality possessed only by Chinese poetry, results from the ideographic nature of the characters; one gets a definite impression from the appearance of the writing, and an unexpected vision of the whole poem. The flowers, the forests, the streams, and the moonlight, all these pre-

sent themselves before one has commenced to read. For example, in the poem of Li-Taï-Pé, "Good Fortune on the High-road," the effect at first glance is of prancing horses, and before knowing what he will say, one seems to see the poet riding haughtily among the flowers.

Today in China, as of old, the words and music are always united; the poems are not recited but sung, and in most cases the singing is accompanied by the Chinese lyre, the "Kine." But this sacred instrument can only vibrate in the presence of burning incense and before those who are mentally fitted to listen, for its delicate strings break if their waves of melody encounter unattuned ears.

Twelve centuries before Orpheus and fifteen before David and Homer, the Chinese poets were singing their verses to the music of the lyre, and they are unique in that they are singing still, almost in the same language and to the same melodies.

Chinese Lyrics

Mid-River

In my boat rocked by the river,
gently rocked while the daylight lasts,
I row and I gaze at the mountains,
glassed in the water.

I have now no other love
but the love of wine,
and my cup full of wine is before me.

Once I had in my heart a thousand sorrows,
but now . . .
I look at the mountains,
glassed in the water.

Tchang-Tsi

To the Most Beautiful Woman of the Flower Boat

I HAVE sung songs to you
with my flute of ebony,
songs telling of my sadness,
but you did not hear.

I have written verses
praising your beauty,
but you have thrown the gorgeous sheets
that bore my poems
disdainfully into the water.

Then I gave you a huge sapphire,
a dark sapphire like the sky at night,
and for that sapphire you have shown me
the little pearls of your mouth.

Ouan-Tsi.

On the Road to Tchi-Li

I SIT by the wayside on a fallen tree,
and gaze along the road
that stretches before me to Tchi-Li.

This morning
the blue satin of my shoes glistened like steel,
and one could see the black-embroidered traceries;
but now my shoes are covered with dust.

When I set out
the sun was laughing in the sky,
the butterflies hovered around me,
and I counted the white daisies,
scattered through the grass
like handfuls of pearls.

It is evening now,
and there are no daisies.

Swallows dart by swiftly at my feet;
crows are calling each other to rest,
and labourers are entering the villages near by,
with their plaits wrapped round their heads.

But for me there are many miles to go;
I will compose a poem,
as full of sadness as my lonely heart,
and with a rhythm so difficult
that the road to Tchi-Li will seem too short.

Tin-Tun-Ling.

Song on the River

My boat is of ebony;
the holes in my flute are golden.

As a plant takes out stains from silk,
so wine takes sadness from the heart.

When one has good wine,
a graceful boat,
and a maiden's love,
why envy the immortal gods?

Li-Taï-Pé.

Intoxication of Love

THE petals of the water-lilies tremble
as the wind murmurs
through the Palace of the Waters.

The King of Lou
lounges idly on the terrace of Kou-Sou;
before him is Sy-Ché;
she is dancing,
and her movements are rhythmic
and full of delicate grace.

Then she laughs,
sensuous in her weariness;
she leans against the royal white jade bed,
and gazes towards the east.

Li-Taï-Pé.

A Dwelling in the Heart

CRUEL flames laid waste the house where I was born;
I put to sea in my gilded ship
to lessen my despair.

I took my flute and played to the moon,
but she hid her face with a cloud
for my song was sad.

Disheartened I turned back to the mountain,
but I found no solace there;
childhood joys seemed to vanish with my home.

I wished for death;
but then the moon seemed mirrored in the sea,
and past me sped a maiden in her bark.

Were it her wish,
I'd build another dwelling
in her heart.

Thou-Fou.

The Birds Are Singing at Dusk

AT dusk a cool wind
blows the song of birds to a window
where a maiden is sitting.

She is embroidering a piece of silk
with bright flowers.

She lifts her head;
her work falls from her hands
for her thoughts have flown to him
who is far away.

"It is easy for a bird to find its mate
among the branches,
but all the tears
that fall like the rain of heaven
from a maiden's eyes
will not recall her well-beloved."

She bends over her work once more:
"I will weave a fragment of verse
among the flowers of his robe,
and perhaps its words will tell him to return."

Li-Taï-Pé.

The Cormorant

THE cormorant meditates,
standing motionless and alone
at the river's edge;
his round eye follows the flowing water.

If a passer-by comes too near,
he flaps away balancing his head
and waits in the thicket for the intruder to go,
wishing to gaze again
upon the undulations of the stream.

And at night
when the moon shines upon the waves,
the cormorant meditates,
standing with one foot in the water.

Thus a man whose heart is burning with passion
follows the undulations of a thought.

Su-Tong-Po.

The Shoreless Sea

OH dragon,
you who rule the shoreless sea of death,
steal away my loved one
while, bending over her in passionate musing,
I drink in her breath,
bear her away on your ghostly ship,
and take me with her
so we may sail together always,
drunk with love.

Li-Hung-Chang.
19th Century.

Moonlight

THE full moon rises out of the water;
the sea becomes a plate of silver.

On a boat friends drink cups of wine,
and they watch the little moonlit clouds
hover above the mountain.

Some say—
the white-robed wives of the Emperor,
others—
a flock of swans.

Li-Oey.

The Wild Swans

BEFORE daybreak the breezes whisper
through the trellis at my window;
they interrupt and carry off my dream,
and he of whom I dreamed
vanishes from me.

I climb upstairs
to look from the topmost window,
but with whom? . . .

I remember how I used to stir the fire
with my hairpin of jade
as I am doing now . . .
but the brasier holds nothing but ashes.

I turn to look at the mountain;
there is a thick mist,
a dismal rain,
and I gaze down at the wind-dappled river,
the river that flows past me forever
without bearing away my sorrow.

I have kept the rain of my tears
on the crape of my tunic;

with a gesture I fling these bitter drops
to the wild swans on the river,
that they may be my messengers.

Ly-y-Hane.

At the River's Edge

AT the river's edge
maidens are bathing among the water-lilies;
they are hidden from the shore,
but their laughter can be heard,
and on the bank
their silken robes perfume the wind.

A youth on horseback passes near;
one of the maidens feels her heart beat faster,
and she blushes deeply.

Then she hides herself
among the clustered water-lilies.

Li-Taï-Pé.

The Leaf on the Water

THE wind tears a leaf from the willow tree;
it falls lightly upon the water,
and the waves carry it away.

Time has gradually effaced a memory
from my heart,
and I watch the willow leaf drifting away
on the waves;
since I have forgotten her
whom I loved,
I dream the day through in sadness,
lying at the water's edge.

But the willow leaf floated back
under the tree,
and it seemed to me
that the memory could never be effaced
from my heart.

Ouan-Tsi.

The Great Rat

OH cruel ravenous rat,
do not devour all my grain!

For three long years
I have endured the outrage of your savage teeth,
and vainly sought to curb you
with my tears.

But now at last I go;
I shall flee your awful power;
I shall build a house in distant lands,
in happy lands
where remorse lasts but a day.

Sao-Nan.

The Forbidden Flower

My boat rocks
beneath the autumn moon.

Alone
I drift on the Southern Lake,
plucking the white lotus flowers.

A desire consumes me;
I would declare my passion for them,
but alas . . .
my boat glides on
at the mercy of the cunning waves,
and my heart is plunged in sadness.

Li-Taï-Pé.

Vengeance

"AH, the cock crows!"
"Not yet, beloved, for it is still night."
"Arise, arise! pull back the curtains;
search the heavens."
"Alas, the morning star has arisen."
"Ah! it is the dawn;
the hour has come,
but first take vengeance on him
who separates us;
seize your bow and kill the cock."

Unknown.

The Fisherman

THE earth has drunk the snow,
and now the plum trees are blossoming once more.

The willow leaves are like new gold;
the lake is molten silver.

It is the hour
when sulphur-laden butterflies
rest their velvet heads upon the flowers.

A fisherman casts forth his nets
from a motionless boat,
and the surface of the lake is broken.

His thoughts are at home with her
to whom he will return with food,
like a swallow to its mate.

Li-Taï-Pé.

Before Her Mirror

SITTING before her mirror,
she gazes at the floor
where the bamboo curtain breaks the moonlight
into a thousand bits of jade.

Instead of combing her hair
she raises the curtain,
and in the room it is as though a woman,
robed in white silk,
had let fall her mantle.

Tchan-Jo-Su.

The Porcelain Pavilion

OUT in the artificial lake
there is a pavilion of green and white porcelain;
it is reached by a bridge of jade,
arched like the back of a tiger.

In the pavilion friends in bright-coloured robes
are drinking cups of cool wine;
they chatter and scribble verses,
their sleeves tucked up,
their hats pushed back.

In the water
where the reflected bridge
seems a crescent of jade,
the friends in bright-coloured robes
are drinking heads downward
in a porcelain pavilion.

Li-Taï-Pé.

The Tranquil River

MEN may look at the moon all their lives;
it crosses the sky
as a tranquil river follows its course,
never faltering or lingering behind,
but men's thoughts are ephemeral
and wandering.

Tchan-Jo-Su.

The Willow Leaf

THE maiden who gazes dreamily from her window
resting on her elbows,—
I do not love her for her splendid palace
on the banks of the Yellow River;
I love her
because she has dropped a little willow leaf
into the water.

I do not love the breeze from the east
because it brings me
the scent of the blossoming peach trees
that whiten the Oriental Mountain;
I love it
because it has blown the little willow leaf
close to my boat.

And the little willow leaf,—
I do not love it for reminding me
of the tender spring
that has just flowered again;
I love it
because the maiden has written a name on it
with the point of her embroidery needle,
and because that name is mine.

Tchan-Tiou-Lin.

Youth

THE care-free youth
who lives on the road of the Imperial Tombs,
near the Gold Market of the East,
sets out from his dwelling
into the fresh spring wind.

The step of his white horse
saddled in silver
is graceful and full of rhythm.

There is a whirlwind of petals underfoot,
for the fallen blossoms
form a thick carpet everywhere.

Now he slackens his pace,
perplexed . . .
a laugh greets him from a nearby thicket,
musical and clear;
he is no longer perplexed.

Li-Taï-Pé.

Thoughts on the Seventh Month

I DREAM among the flowers
of my garden,
sipping wine clear as jade.

The wind caresses my cheeks,
it cools the scorching air;
but how glad I shall be of my cloak
when winter comes again.

In the summer of her beauty,
a woman is like the wind in August;
she sweetens our lives.

But when the white silk of age
covers her head,
we avoid her
like the wind in winter.

Li-Taï-Pé.

The Autumn Wind

THE autumn wind rises,
white clouds are flying before it,
yellow leaves are torn from the trees
by the river.

Already the wild geese are winging their way
towards the south,
the rose is sweet no longer,
and petals are falling
from the lotus flowers.

I must see her whom I love
and can never forget;
I jump into my boat
to cross the river to the pavilion
where she dwells.

The stream is swift
and the waters,
darkened by the wind,
flow with a sound like rustling silk;
how far away seems the other shore,
as far away as ever!

To give me courage
I sing as I row,
but my songs are sad
and make my toil heavier.

My heart is young and ardent;
it flies before me
and pitilessly leaves me.

Have the winds of so many autumns
broken my strength?
is it the image of an old man
that trembles up at me
from the water?

The Emperor Ou-Ty.
Han Dynasty, 140 B. C.

A Poet Smiles

THE little lake is as still and clear
as a cup full of water.

On the shore
the bamboos are like huts,
roofed by the green foliage of the trees,
and the tall pointed rocks
rising out of the flowers
are like pagodas.

I let my boat drift gently,
and I smile at Nature
imitating Man.

Ouan-Tsi.

The Fan

THE bride is sitting in the Perfumed Chamber
to which the bridegroom came for the first time
the night before.

She holds up her fan;
she reads the writing on it:
"when the air is stifling
and no wind blows,
I am sought for, beloved for my freshness;
but when the wind stirs
and the air is cold,
I am disdained
and forgotten."

As she reads these words
the young wife dreams of her husband;
sad thoughts assail her:
"his heart is burning now
with youthful passion,
he comes here to refresh his heart;
but when time chills it,
perhaps I too will be disdained
and forgotten."

Tchan-Jo-Su.

A Young Poet Dreams of His Beloved Who Lives Across the River

THE moon floats to the bosom of the sky
and rests there like a lover;
the evening wind passes over the lake,
touches and passes,
kissing the happy shivering waters.

How serene the joy,
when things that are made for each other
meet and are joined;
but ah,—
how rarely they meet and are joined,
the things that are made for each other.

Sao-Nan.

On the River

A SINGLE gray cloud is floating
in the sky,
and my boat is alone
on the river.

Now the moon is climbing the heavens,
and sinking into the water;
the cloud is gray no longer
and I am happier in my boat
alone on the river.

Tchan-Jo-Su.

To Forget One's Thoughts

LET us rejoice together,
and fill our porcelain goblets again
with cool wine;
though the joyous spring is waning now,
it will return.

Let us drink while we are thirsty,
and perhaps we shall forget
we are at the winter of our lives
and the flowers are fading.

Ouan-Oui.

On the River Tchou

My boat glides swiftly
beneath the wide cloud-ridden sky,
and as I look into the river
I can see the clouds drift by the moon;
my boat seems floating
on the sky.

And thus I dream
my beloved is mirrored
on my heart.

Thou-Fou.

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